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## The Silent Cry of Betrawati: Unveiling Nepal's Frontier Diplomacy from 1788-1792 AD

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### ABSTRACT

*Does Nepal have the capacity to safeguard its territorial integrity against stronger nations? In answering this perennial question, it is imperative to examine the historical period when Nepal confronted the formidable Chinese army, at Betrawati. This paper hypothesizes that, a weaker state's war with a powerful nation is not a zero-sum game occurring in isolation; rather, it unfolds in a specific global socio-economic and political framework. From this standpoint, the study examines the chronicles of the Sino-Nepal war of 1788-92 A.D. Employing a historical research design, the paper relies on secondary data drawn from both public and private documentary sources. It first analyses the strategic environment between 1788-1792 AD and subsequently examines the nuances of socio-economic, political and military dimensions shaping the conflict. The article also synthesizes the impact of internal and external factors on the Sino-Nepalese War and seeks to analyze the geopolitical ramifications of the war. Moreover, the paper posits that assessing how a military fulfills inherited strategic obligations necessitate multifaceted study of history and the socio-political setting that often transcend conventional boundaries. Finally, the paper argues that despite confronting a militarily superior adversary, Nepal successfully safeguarded its sovereignty and territorial integrity, with the prudent deployment of dense constellation of interacting variables such as terrain, agile diplomatic maneuvering, and the unwavering resilience of the Nepali society.*

### Introduction

Betrawati is a quiet and relatively unassuming town situated in Nuwakot, in the vicinity of forty-five miles north of Nepal's capital, Kathmandu. Nestled at the confluence of the Trisuli and Betrawati rivers, the city, at present, consists largely of a modest a cluster of shops surrounded by agriculture land. It comprises modest landmarks, and the most travelers may pass through without pause. At first look, it is difficult to envision that Betrawati holds any historical relevance. Yet beneath this seemingly ordinary exterior lies a profound historical legacy. Betrawati, apparently forgotten and forlorn, remains deeply embedded in the formative episodes of Nepal's history.

During the period of 1790's, Nepal was advancing its unification campaign in the western part of the Nepal. In particular, the Gorkhali state was engaged in suppressing revolts in Achham, Doti and Jumla (Bajracharya, 1992). Against this backdrop, confronting a military force of China augmented by one of the most advanced economic and military capabilities was far from trivial. The conflict was not a mere border skirmish, but a complex geopolitical episode involving the Kingdom of Nepal, the Tibetan government under Qing suzerainty, and the direct intervention of the Qing Dynasty itself (Pokharel, 2025). In 1792 AD when Nepal had a confrontation at Betrawati with China, critical state assets were relocated from Kathmandu to Makwanpur Fort (Kirkpatrick, 2021), which shows that for the first time in history, Nepal's sovereignty was at stake. But what was unfolding in Betrawati was not solely because of debased coins as many scholars claimed. As such, this paper attempt to examine the intricate nature of Sino-Nepal war through the lens of structural realism. This paper seeks to examine the Sino-Nepal War accounting for the internal and external factors and the geopolitical ramifications of the conflict. Central to this analysis is triangular relationship among China, Nepal, and Tibet during the period 1788-1792 AD. This study eschews the operational and tactical aspects of the war, instead focusing on, how Nepal withstood a materially superior adversary with the prudent use of complexities of its terrain, inherent societal resilience, and adaptive political judgment within an evolving regional geopolitical landscape.

### **Significance of the Study**

Nepal has historically existed amidst a geopolitical whirlwind and between two colossal neighbors, a ground reality as asserted by King Prithvi Narayan Shah in his dictum "Yam between two boulders". In the context of enduring shifts in the global security environment, the question of whether Nepal can uphold its sovereignty remains highly salient. This study, therefore, is a deliberate effort to stimulate discussion on the issue and forward the agenda for national security policymakers. Existing literature tends to accentuate the Sino-Nepal war dynamics in operational and tactical scales; however, less emphasis has been given to the influence of the anarchic structure of world order on the consequence of the war. As a result, nuanced understanding on how Nepal, as a relatively weaker state, magnificently navigated such a geopolitical undercurrent is not merely an academic exercise; it is equally crucial from national security perspective.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach tied within a historical research design, centered on relational understanding. Secondary data, collected from archival sources such as manuscripts, chronicles, government records, scholarly works were analysed to draw purposeful findings. By systematically analyzing the available data, this study seeks to identify patterns, narratives, and perspectives that illuminate how geopolitical factors shape historically significant events. It further aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the central concept, underscoring the importance of contextual interpretation in exploring the complex interplay among war, society, and statecraft.

### **The Domestic Fault-lines**

During 17<sup>th</sup> century King Pratap Malla of Kantipur made expedition to Kuti and secured a right to mint the coins for Tibet (Manandhar & Rathaur, 2022). Two ambitious kings of Nepal, Rama Shah of Gorkha (1606-33) and Pratap Malla of Kathmandu (1624-74), took advantage of Tibetan weakness to seize control of the vital border-pass areas through which most of the trans- Himalayan trade passed (Rose, 1971). Later, following the conquest of the Nuwakot valley, Jayaprakash Malla of Kathmandu and Prithivi Narayan Shah of Gorkha signed a treaty in 1757 AD, granting both parties equal rights to mint the coins for Tibet, a lucrative enterprise (Uprety, 1998).

Later, due to looming war with the Gorkhals and the resulting economic turmoil in his kingdom, the last Malla king of Kathmandu, Jaya Prakash Malla toward the end of his reign, had sent large quantities of low-quality mohars and sukis (silver coins) not only within his own kingdom but also to Tibet (Acharya, 2080). Later, when Prithvi Narayan Shah captured Kathmandu, he not only annexed a culturally and economically prosperous territory, but also inherited a legacy of deeply entangled economic and geopolitical relations, particularly the complex monetary ties with Tibet. This created asymmetric interdependences critically reliant on minting trade, meaning that any conflict with Tibet could prove extremely costly for Nepal. It was within this historical context that disputes over currency—most notably the debased coin, or *Khota Sikka*—emerged and became a central source of tension.

### **The Evolving Geo-Strategic Environment**

During the same period,, substantial transformations were undertaking in the geostrategic landscape at unprecedented scale. Approximately five hundred miles south of Kathmandu, Robert Clive gained a victory in the Battle of Plassey, often described as one of the greatest anti-climax in history. This battle is frequently credited with determining the subsequent trajectory of India under British colonial rule (McGINTY, 1947). Eventually, the British administrative control reached to the edge of the Nepal's Tarai region plausibly reverberating the trajectory of domestic stability. Furthermore, Ahmad Shah from Afghanistan led a campaign in 1756-1757 AD campaign at the imperial center, seizing Delhi and proclaiming himself the overlord of the Mughal Emperor (Lally, 2018). The British Empire was ascending as a dominant imperial power, while the Mughal Empire was in a state of decline. The power vacuum thus created in the Northern India provided Nepal an opportunity to pursue assertive diplomatic initiatives both within and beyond the Himalayan frontier, largely free from the threat of external intervention. Moreover, significant geopolitical shifts were unraveling on a global scale. The French Revolution, at its height in 1792 AD dismantled the symbols of monarchy (Harden, 1995) and in February 1793 AD, France declared war on Britain, Spain and the Netherlands that continued until 1815 AD (Black, 2008). Napoleon rose to power from ashes of the protracted wars between France and Britain from 1792 to 1815 AD. In such geopolitical current, the Gorkha Kingdom pursued an ambitious unification campaign. During Bahadur Shah's regency, Nepal expanded westward achieving control as far as Kumaon (Stiller, 1973), approximately 1,000 kilometers from Kathmandu. Just few years before this geopolitical whirlpool, a significant incident occurred in Nepal: the death of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, which marked a significant turning point in the kingdom's history.

### **Defining Moment: Nepal at the Crossroad of History**

The year 1775 AD marked a period of significant upheaval. The Pandays and Basnyats, who had served as King Prithvi Narayan Shah's right- and left-hand men were no longer by his side. Furthermore, the anti-Gorkhali faction was gaining strength. Simultaneously, the anti-Gorkhali faction was gaining strength, a development that deeply concerned the king due to its potential detrimental effect on the unity and stability of Nepal (Acharya, 2080). Amidst these internal uncertainties, King Prithvi's untimely death occurred. On 11<sup>th</sup> January, 1775 AD 23 years old Pratap Singh Shah ascended the throne (Stiller, 1995). During his upbringing, King Prithvi had been deeply engaged in military campaigns in the Kathmandu Valley, and paradoxically, the future successor was being instructed in tantric rituals rather than (Stiller, 1995) statecraft. Consequently, the evolving geopolitical trajectories of the period reveal a profound asymmetry between the strategic necessities of the kingdom and the actual capacities of its reigning leadership..

### **The Pivotal Moment: The Himalayan Geopolitical Calculus**

The history is path-dependent, since choices, once made, eliminate certain options and create others (Nye, 1999). The domestic situation of Nepal deteriorated further following the death of King Pratap Singh died on November 17, 1777 AD (Bajracharya, 1992), leaving his infant son Rana Bahadur and his wife Rajendra Laxmi behind. It was in the heart of this complex and newly unified state that Bahadur Shah rose to power at the age of 27 year in July 1785 AD (Stiller, 1995), a man who had inherited a leadership quality from his father, honed on the frontline of the unification campaign.

Moreover, the structural asymmetry of domestic political trajectories and the regional power configurations has profound impact on the Himalayan frontier. During the transition from Governor-General Warren Hastings—who sought to amass substantial profits through the exploitation of trans-Himalayan trade—to the appointment of Charles Cornwallis, who placed less emphasis on this trade (Uprety, 1998), plans for northern trade collapsed (Camman, 1951). From this analysis, two key conclusions emerge regarding the shifting geo-economic landscape. First, these developments were bound to impact the Himalayan geopolitical contour. Second, the reduced threat from the southern neighbor created a favorable environment for the Gorkhas, allowing Bahadur Shah greater latitude to pursue his political and territorial ambitions beyond the Himalayan frontier.

Geopolitics has always played a crucial role in shaping a nation's strategic choices (Angdembe, 2025). In that pretext, it is reasonable to presume that Tibet, due to its socio-economic interests, was closely observing burgeoning internal political irritations inside Nepal. As internal stability debilitated, the long-standing clash over coinage trade between the two countries reached a critical stage—an event that appears unlikely to have been mere coincidence..

To understand what gave Tibet the confidence to fight against this rising, battle-hardened Gorkhali Army, one must examine the dynamics of association between China and Tibet. After the death of Third Panchen Lama during good will visit to China and the dispute between his two brothers, Drungpa Truluk and Shamer Truluk, over the property, eventually forced

Shamer Truluk to flee Tibet and come to Nepal via Sikkim (Uprety, 1998). Whereas the mutual discord over debased coinage already started to heat up the contours of the Himalayan frontier. The diffusion of economic statecraft has produced systemic instability. At the epicenter of this escalating diplomatic dilemma was, no other than Shamer Truluk.

### **The Point of No Return: Road to War**

Nepal sent a letter to the Chinese Emperor detailing the reasons for the coin dispute, but the Ambans, the Chinese representatives in Tibet, decided unilaterally to halt the letter (Stiller, 1995). During the course of the research, this study was unable to locate any specific, substantiated reasons for why the letter was halted. Nevertheless,, this incident indicates that neither Tibet nor China was willing to ease the deteriorating relations. This, in turn, became the immediate cause of the Gorkhali invasion in 1788 AD. Meanwhile the Gurkhas officially maintained that they only took this measure after their appeal for a conference on trade and currency had been insultingly rejected (Camman, 1951). Nepal launched an attack on Tibet in July, 1788 AD (Bajracharya,1992) concluded with the signing of treaty of Kerong in 1789 AD.

To the north, China was at the height of its prosperity, a civilization projecting the authority of a unified state (Pye, 1990). At that juncture, with China's backing, Tibet conducted a geopolitical assessment and decided to violate the recently concluded Kerong treaty with Nepal. Moreover, Tibet felt humiliated by Samarpa Lama's participation in a treaty considering it unequal. This became the immediate cause for Nepal-Tibet-China war in 1792 AD, reflecting a trajectory guided by realpolitik. As Kant (1917) noted, no treaty of peace should be regarded as valid if it is concluded with secret preparations for a future war—a principle that once again resonated in the Himalayan frontier. Nevertheless, the temporal gambit of Bahadur Shah, mobilizing society and economy onto a war footing, was not without peril. The uneven events that unfolded in the wilderness of Betrawati underscore a farsighted objectivity of the *Dibya Upadesh* by the King Prithvi Narayan Shah.

At that very moment, in India, from 1790-1792 AD, Cornwallis was compelled to guide the Company's military campaigns in the Second Mysore War (Camman, 1951), having already captured Bangalore. Consequently, the study concludes that the British government's preoccupation with a critically important war in India indirectly facilitated the the swift resolution of the Sino-Nepal war in 1792 AD. This event marked a watershed moment, although, it was not the first occasion that the Nepali Army had confronted military force far stronger than itself. In 1762 AD, it had crushed Gurgin Khan, and in 1766 AD, Captain Kinloch's troops (Bajracharya,1992). It is plausible that Bahadur Shah drew resolute courage to face China from the martial competencies and valor of his father, Prithvi Narayan Shah—stories likely recounted as bedtime narratives.. Thereafter, the politico-economic landscape of the Himalayan region was never the same again. Paradoxically, what began as a relationship of economic interdependence, ultimately spiraled into a security dilemma, precipitating armed conflict, known as "Sino-Nepal War", unfolded at Betrawati.

### **The Paradigmatic Shift: China's Footprint in the Himalayan Landscape**

Every point in history is a crossroad (Harari, 2015). In 1775 AD Asia accounted for 80 percent of the world economy. The Combined economics of India and China alone represented two-third of global population. Long before Columbus, China's Admiral Zheng He commanded vast fleets that sailed to nearly every continent's shores between 1405 and 1433 AD (Harari, 2015). Such was the technological and military might of China that it had achieved in process of furthering civilization. Nevertheless, to understand why the Emperor of China made such a harsh decision to interfere, it is necessary to analyze the events of Nepal's attack on Tibet in 1790–1791 AD. The Nepali invasions of Tibet in 1791 AD were not merely conflicts between Nepal and Tibet nor were they only raids aimed at the seizure of loot (Rose, 1971). The incident that truly precipitated China's decisive military involvement against Nepal in 1792 AD was the Gorkhali Army's deep penetration into Tibet and the subsequent looting of the Tashilhunpo Monastery.

Furthermore, the monastery contained the accumulations of centuries of religious gift and tribute (Camman, 1951), the sacred monastery of Panchen Lama (Killigrew, 1979). The Gurkhas looted chapels and temples as well as dwelling chambers and pried off the jeweled ornaments atop the stupa-tombs of the deceased Panchens (Camman, 1951)- a serious blow to the emperor's credibility to protect and support the Buddhism. The decision can be interpreted as the Chinese emperor comprehending the invasion of Nepal as an assault on his religious and cultural heritage that was equally sacred to them. From these events, it becomes evident how identity and collective norms shape and influence the bilateral relationship between the two states.

Consequently, the Qianlong Emperor summoned Fuk'anggan, then viceroy of the provinces of Kwangtung and Kwangsi (Camman, 1951), to lead a special force composed of several thousand So-lun and Ta-ho-erh bannermen from the Manchu-Mongolian frontier, as well as several hundred imperial guardsmen (Killigrew, 1979).. Bannerman constituted core military and administrative apparatus of the Qing dynasty. The Manchu, Mongol and Han Chinese were organized into 'Banners' which were not merely military units but a social and economic class that received special privileges, specially land. So-lun and Ta-ho-erh were renowned for their horsemanship and hunting skills (Qiu, 2024). In addition to this elite force, the Qing mobilized two thousand military colony troops from Western Szuchuan, including some Green Standard troops (Killigrew, 1979). These Green troops were mainstay of the Qing military, alongside the elite Eight Banners (Qiu, 2024). The assembly of such a formidable military force, to be commanded by one of the Empire's most celebrated generals against a relatively small kingdom like Gorkha, had profound implications for the survival and self-reliance of Nepal. Furthermore, political objective of the Qing Dynasty was to advance into the Gurkha lands with the goal of destroying the ruling dynasty and redistributing the conquered lands to the local chieftains, thereby undermining the state consolidated by Prithvi Narayan Shah.

Notwithstanding, that the attack by the Chinese military force was unprecedented in scale and trajectory, the Chinese army had, after few months, suffered very heavily due to unforgiving climatic conditions and the psychological blow of the sheer distance, and was in no state to push forward (Up्रेty, 1998). In any circumstance, great powers are often unsure about how

their own military force and that of the adversary's will perform in the battlefield (Mearsheimer, 2014). Eventually, Fuk'anggan reportedly faced daily frustrations in the army camp, anxiously awaiting rations from Ch'ilung, only to discover that supplies had been reduced by half. He acknowledged that the army was experiencing serious logistical deficiencies (Killigrew, 1979). In contrast, Bahadur Shah successfully capitalized on these challenges effectively trapping the "lion" of the Qing army in the wilderness of Betrawati (Bajracharya, 1992). Eventually, with the loss of troops compounded by desperate logistical condition forced China and Nepal to reach a negotiated conclusion to the conflict.

Shrestha (2019) states that the Betrawati Treaty was concluded on 5 October 1792 CE, formally ending the war. However, the available empirical evidence is inconclusive and provides little support for the claim that an actual, formally signed treaty existed. Notably, in 1909 AD, Padma Jang Bahadur Rana, the third son of Prime Minister Jang Bahadur, published an English text of the treaty without presenting an original document (Michaels, 2024), signals that the Betrawati war was concluded without any formal signed treaty.

### **After the War: Implication of War on Himalayan Stability and Beyond**

War's logic is not the logic of art, or of science or engineering, but rather the logic of social transactions (Department of the Navy, 1997). During the study, it became apparent that scholars hold diverse opinions regarding whether Nepal emerged victorious in the war of 1792 AD. One challenge in framing the conflict in terms of victory is that "victory" is an emotion-laden word (Department of the Navy, 1997). Hamilton claimed that Nepal-China war can be best described as a stalemate (Stiller, 1973). The outcome of the Sino-Nepal War of 1791–1792 CE, particularly the question of which side emerged victorious, remains uncertain and continues to be a subject of scholarly (Michaels, 2024). This paper contends that analyzing the war through a dichotomous lens of "win" or "loss" may obscure the complexities and nuances inherent in the conflict. Nevertheless, the Tibetans arguably suffered the greatest losses in this war (Uprety, 1998), illustrating the broader principle that every war entails significant trade-offs.

Following the Betrawati war, in 1793 AD Emperor Qing promulgated the 29-article a decree that elevated the Amban to a level equivalent to that of Chinese provincial governors (Sperling, 2004 and placed the Tibetan religious and political hierarchies under the supervision of the Amban (Dabringhaus, 2014). Henceforth, even the selection of Lama reincarnations was to be controlled by the Ambans (Camman, 1951). Many Tibetans living in the frontier region had fled to Lhasa, where they joined a roaming and starving crowd of beggars (Dabringhaus, 2014). Moreover, Amban of Tibet, strictly prohibited the celestial burial rites (Dabringhaus, 2014), which were inviolable from religious point of view. Consequently, it was only after 1792 that a small force was permanently stationed at Shigatse, to guard the Panchen Lama (Petech, 1972). Available evidences point to the fact that the war had a profound impact on Tibet's social, economic, political, and religious aspects, with the increasing influence of Chinese ambans at its core.

The ramification of war exacerbate in the global geoeconomic arena as well. Precisely one year after the Nepal-China War, British for their part aimed at widening the existing channels of trade, sent an experienced diplomat, George Lord McCartney, arrived at the Chusan Roads

on the 3 July 1773 (Kunwar, 1962). Coincidentally, when he met Fuk'anggan, newly returned from Tibet, in Jehol that autumn, the latter behaved rudely. McCartney later blamed the relative lack of success of his mission in some part on Fu-K'ang-an's suspicion that the English had aided the Gurkhas (Camman, 1951). Apparently, McCartney mission was failed to convince the Emperor of China. This episode can be interpreted as one of the significant unintended consequences of the Betrawati conflict, demonstrating how a regional war had ripple effects on broader diplomatic and trade initiatives. Concomitantly, these developments influenced the politico-economic trajectories of the Himalayan region for years to come.

The early and mid-Ch'ing periods were generally considered to have been a time of political and social consolidation and stability (Killigrew, 1979). China embroiled in Lotus rebels (1796-1804 AD) in central area. Right after the six years of the conclusion of the war with Nepal, Emperor Qianlong collapsed in 1799 AD (Dabringhaus, 2014). Moreover, commercial treaty was signed with British East India Company on March 1, 1792 (Bajracharya, 1992) motivated in part by the potential Chinese military action. Subsequently, Lord Cornwallis deputed Captain Kirkpatrick, the first Englishman to visit Nepal, to engage with the Nepali court; however, he failed to persuade the courtiers of Nepal (Bajracharya, 1992). Over time, growing suspicions regarding Bahadur Shah's perceived pro-British stance culminated in his removal by his nephew, the king, in 1794 CE.

Yet again, the timeless wisdom of King Prithvi Narayan Shah in his *Dibya-Updesh* (Words of Wisdom) underscoring the significance of upholding a strong friendship with the Emperor of China (Nepali Army, 2077) have proven remarkably visionary. On the other hand, The Sun Tzu philosophy of war which proclaims that numerical superiority does not always conform victory, reverberated quietly in the battlefield at Betrawati. Undeniably, from this military adventurism, Nepal's state apparatus learned great lesson about the sheer cruelty of geo-politics by almost losing its sacred sovereignty. Yet, the confrontation also conveyed a counter-lesson: prevailing against the battle-tested Gorkhali troops on their home terrain was far from a straightforward endeavor.

## **Conclusion**

Nepal's formidable Himalayas and societal resilience, and underlying tectonic shift occurring around the regional and global landscape served as key strategic deterrents, effectively containing the advance of the Chinese Military backed by Tibet in the Sino-Nepal war. Sustaining the Nepal's war economy required continuance of trade with Tibet, as an indispensable precondition. At the same time, the plundering of sacred Buddhist pilgrimage sites, Tashilhunpo, provoked the Chinese Emperor Qianlong, prompting decisive military action.. Undeniably, the inability of Nepal's state apparatus to anticipate potential Chinese intervention represented a critical flaw. Conversely, the Chinese assumption that Nepal could be easily subdued ultimately proved incorrect. These historical episodes draw the attention of researchers and policymakers alike, offering insights into navigating complex geopolitical landscapes and formulating a nuanced understanding of enduring security challenges—an essential prerequisite for ensuring national security.

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